

Central & Eastern Montana – Montanans for Bio-Product Development



Governor Brian Schweitzer appointed the State Workforce Investment Board, comprised of private, public, and tribal representatives, in partnership with the Montana Department of Labor and Industry, to lead this project. It will spur the evolution of Montana's workforce through the creation of innovative biolubricant and bioproduct manufacturing embryonic clusters in the WIRED region of central and eastern Montana.

The identified WIRED region, encompassing 32 counties and six Indian Reservations, has historically relied heavily on agriculture as an economic force. Seven years of extreme drought has resulted in regional socio-economic trends comparable to the "dustbowl era" of the 1930's. These socio-economic trends include: an aging and declining population, wage and salary income that is both depressed and stagnant, a high prevalence of poverty, and an increasing reliance on federal farm subsidies for farm income. Montana must nurture an innovative value-added industry that benefits domestic agriculture and creates globally competitive enterprises resulting in high paying jobs in rural communities. Montana's manufacturing jobs pay an annual wage of approximately \$35,300 per worker compared to an average of \$27,800 for all Montana workers. In addition to high wages for workers, a regional input-output model shows that for every job created in an oilseed crushing plant, two additional jobs will be created in the WIRED region. Currently, less than 12% of Montana's manufacturing firms are located in eastern and central Montana.

The strength of rural Montana is the people – the diligent homesteader – and their love for the region. Through committed partnerships (Montana's citizens, state agencies, private businesses, investors, academic institutions, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, and Tribal leaders) the region will develop new directions for the future of rural Montana, incorporate best practices, and transform the rural Ag-economy including, but not limited to: 1) systems level curriculum roadmap with supporting course materials using the cluster as context; 2) delivery models that provide blended e-learning and instructor delivery; 3) Manufacturing Career Cluster model that provides students and incumbent workers the educational information to create a career pathway; 4) models for increasing collaboration with industry partners to develop competency-based modular training programs; 5) optimization of biolubricant production in existing industry; 6) expansion of existing establishment of oilseed processing and refining facilities; and 7) evaluation of new oil crops suitable for production in the arid climate of central and eastern Montana.

Governor Schweitzer declared the WIRED region to be primed for a “New Homestead Act,” as a means to reverse the erosion of central and eastern Montana communities. While a startling number of rural, geographically isolated Montanans live in poverty, with less than 300 miles of Interstate highway, sporadic infrastructure, and only a handful of paved airports, they are also sitting on nearly 89,000 square miles of some of the greatest energy reserves in the nation, be it the wind blowing across the prairies, the crops growing from the ground, or the coal underneath the ground. With advances in biofuels and renewables, the region is well positioned to revitalize the economy with energy development.